

Kashmir earthquake survivors face another freezing winter without adequate shelter

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Last Sunday marked the first anniversary of the devastating 7.6 magnitude earthquake that hit Kashmir. More than 70,000 people were killed in northern Pakistan and the Indian- and Pakistani-controlled areas of Kashmir. Around 3.5 million people were left homeless as cities, towns and villagers throughout the region were levelled.

A year later, politicians and officials held ceremonies to pat themselves on the back, while survivors organised protests against the slow pace of reconstruction, lack of compensation and government corruption. Many refugees face the dangers of another Himalayan winter without proper shelter, basic supplies or adequate health services.

Two demonstrations took place in the Pakistani capital of Islamabad. Thousands of people travelled from the quake-affected areas of Bagh, Muzaffarabad, Battagram and Mansehra to voice their anger last Saturday against the government's woefully insufficient aid effort. Wearing black and red stripes around their heads and arms, they complained about intimidation, flawed policies, lengthy procedural delays and rampant corruption.

The Pakistani government claims to have paid most families the first installment of 25,000 rupees of a promised 100,000-rupee contribution. Demonstrators insisted that the scheme is plagued with corruption. They held up placards and banners declaring: "Who is the killer of thousands of children in earthquake?" "Stop taking bribes" "Spend the winter with us" and "Build our homes before snowfall". Some displayed cheques which they said had bounced.

Hundreds of survivors from Kotli Sathian and Murree staged another demonstration in Islamabad on Sunday over the failure to pay compensation. Placards included: "Where is the \$6 billion in donations?" "Stop

discrimination against the quake-affected people of Murree" and "5,000 rupees as compensation not acceptable".

Across the border in Indian-controlled Jammu and Kashmir, hundreds of survivors held a protest in the town of Uri at the centre of the affected area. The demonstrators complained that the authorities had done little to rebuild their homes and address their other pressing needs. Many are still living in temporary accommodation near Baramulla.

Sakina from the Baramulla camp told the *Hindu* that her husband had died in the quake. She and her four sons had no place to build a home. "I suffer from asthma. My husband would earlier take me to hospital but now I am left with no one to care for me," she said. Chaudhury Farooq explained: "There are no job opportunities and we demand the government should help us."

The character of the official ceremonies was on display in Muzaffarabad, the capital of Pakistani-controlled Kashmir. Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf flew into the city by helicopter and spoke at the Azad Jammu Kashmir University, surrounded by heavy security.

"It is a victory for the government, for the army, for the people, for the non-governmental organisations and for the world that supported it," General Musharraf declared. "It was due to the help and generosity of the whole world and the NGOs that we were able to improve the situation."

It was not much of a "victory", however. According to official statistics from Pakistan's Earthquake Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Authority (ERRA), some 600,000 rural and 30,000 urban homes were damaged or destroyed by last year's quake across a 30,000 square kilometre region of mountainous terrain,

covering nine districts and 4,000 villages.

The ERRA annual report released last week admitted that rehabilitation work has been limited. It noted that the pledges of \$6.5 billion made by international donors at a conference in November 2005 had not materialised. On October 5, Musharraf revised the cost of reconstruction from \$3.6 billion to \$4.4 billion and made another appeal for international assistance.

After hearing Musharraf's speech, Abdul Khaliq, a grocery shop owner in Muzaffarabad, commented: "[These] things ... we have been hearing for the past couple of weeks. There was nothing new. We are yet to see anything concrete being done to help us reconstruct our houses."

Aid agencies point to a looming disaster with the onset of another winter. An Oxfam report published on October 4 warned: "[T]he progress of recovery has been patchy, and the pace of construction of housing and infrastructure has been slow. At least 1.8 million people have not begun rebuilding their homes; most of them are in makeshift shelters that offer limited protection against the coming cold."

Musharraf has dismissed the Oxfam figures, citing the number of refugees still living in official camps. Even this figure is high—35,000 in Pakistani-controlled Kashmir and 5,000 in the North West Frontier Province. The Oxfam report pointed out that many more people remain in unofficial camps, in tents or other makeshift shelter. Many are believed to be landless.

Anisya Thomas, managing director of the Fritz Institute, told the press: "Our findings are alarming. Too many earthquake survivors are facing another winter without basic services and adequate shelter." Saima Ghazal, a surveyor with the International Organisation on Migration, said 90 percent of people in the Neelum Valley were still living in tents.

Essential services have also been affected. More than a million schoolchildren were affected by the quake. Around 8,000 schools were destroyed or damaged across the region. Many children still go to school in tents. Saima Anwer from the UK-based charity Save the Children told the media: "It will take five to seven years to rebuild the education system, meaning some children will never get to attend a real primary school."

According to an *Asia Tribune* report, poverty is increasing in the area. Some 63 percent of survivors

report a loss of income, with those on the lowest income levels worst affected. More than 30 percent of people said they now have inadequate income for survival, compared to 3 percent prior to the earthquake. Unemployment and underemployment is widespread.

In the aftermath of the earthquake, there was speculation in the South Asian and international media that the terrible disaster would bring India and Pakistan closer to resolving their longstanding rivalry and conflict. There was much publicity when Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh rang Musharraf to offer Indian assistance in relief and rescue operations.

The empty gestures of cooperation soon evaporated on both sides, however. Despite the urgency, the two governments could not agree on even basic joint measures. Many of the quake-stricken areas in Pakistan-controlled Kashmir were more readily accessible from Indian territory, yet proposals to open the Line of Control became bogged down in endless argument about protocol and security. Finally, two crossing points were opened more than a month after the quake, but only on a very limited basis.

Pakistan and India were more concerned about the precedents that might be set in allowing free passage between the two areas, than in helping the victims. The same priority is reflected in their budgets. While refugees in both countries are desperate for assistance, Pakistan and India have bolstered their military spending over the past year. India raised its defence budget by 7 percent in February, announcing ambitious plans to modernise its 1.3 million-strong military. Pakistan increased its military spending by 3.8 percent.

As far as the ruling elites in Islamabad and New Delhi are concerned, political and strategic rivalry over Kashmir was far too important for any concessions to be made to the needs of the quake victims. At the official ceremonies last weekend, neither side renewed their calls for cooperation across the Line of Control.



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